



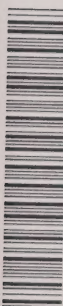
Ministry  
of  
Education  
Ontario

# Growing With Books

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## *Book 2: Who Is Children's Literature For?*

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## Contents

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- 4 Prologue: Children's Literature Is Not Just for Children —  
It's for Grown-ups, Too *Lissa Paul*
- 8 Our Own Words and the Words of Others,  
Part 1 *David Booth and Jo Phenix*
- 28 Cross-Age Tutoring in Writing *Beverley Allinson*
- 46 Six Magic Words *Brenda Protheroe*
- 58 Epilogue: Share, Listen, Mediate *Lissa Paul*
- 62 Bibliography



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*Prologue:*

*Children's Literature Is Not Just*

*for Children – It's for Grown-ups, Too*





## Prologue: Children's Literature Is Not Just for Children – It's for Grown-ups, Too

Lissa Paul

Over the years, educational institutions have acquired the habit of slotting stories into age-defined or grade-defined categories. Some books, we say, are suitable for beginning readers, others for ten-year-olds or for young adults. The categories are familiar. But stories do not have to be read like that. As C. S. Lewis says: "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty."<sup>1</sup>

The articles in this section treat stories as more than just ways of defining reading levels of children. Stories are composed out of the love, attention, and work that authors put into making them. As teachers, we can make new readers conscious of the care that goes into thinking about a story and into writing it. Knowledge of the respect with which authors treat their work and knowledge of the conventions, structures, and techniques of stories can help turn new readers into seasoned readers – and into writers.

The reciprocal relationship between reading and writing is the subject of David Booth's two-part article, "Our Own Words and the Words of Others" (the second part is in Book 5). In the body of the first part teacher Jo Phenix describes how the children she deals with every day learn to read stories by writing, and vice versa. The children find patterns in stories, then make stories that use the patterns. The advice in *The Formative Years* to "experiment with words, word patterns, and idioms"<sup>2</sup> is used in a vital rather than a static way. The clear beauty of one cumulative story is so arresting that a little is quoted here: "One thundering Thursday morning, while on my way to school, I saw four shivering geese flying away, three wet puddles freezing, two yellow leaves falling,

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1. C.S. Lewis, "The Reader and All Kinds of Stories", in *The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading*, ed. Margaret Meek, Aidan Warlaw, and Griselda Barton (London: Bodley Head, 1977), p. 77.


2. Ministry of Education, Ontario, *The Formative Years* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, Ontario, 1975), p. 10.

one cold squirrel gathering nuts near the little path through the woods." (The rest of the poem is on pages 15 to 16, in the Booth/Phenix article.)

Beverley Allinson and Brenda Protheroe write about setting stories free from age-defined and grade-defined straitjackets. Both women write personal accounts of their in-class experiences with helping older children share stories with younger ones. Their articles radiate the success of their projects and demonstrate what taking stories seriously means.

Beverley Allinson, a writer with access to a Grade 7/8 class, had the students read stories with Kindergarten-Grade 1 children, then write stories for them. The two classes operated on a buddy system, with each older child taking responsibility for a younger one. Both groups thrived. The older ones learned what kinds of stories caught and kept the attention of their charges; this gave them first-hand knowledge of such important narrative conventions of literature as, for example, the art of selection. The efforts of the older children were rewarded by the improved literacy of their young partners. In treating reading and writing as something important, as something of tangible value, both older and younger children developed their skills and pleasure in reading.

Brenda Protheroe begins her article with an image of her hulking male Grade 13 students hunched over the class copy of *The Iron Man* by Ted Hughes; they were intent on finishing the story before the end of term. She had started to read the story aloud in class, but did not have time to finish it before the end of term. Her account testifies to the power of *The Iron Man* as a story for adults and children alike, and to her own sensitivity and ability to engage her students. Like the Grade 7/8 children, Protheroe's Grade 13 students studied a unit on children's literature. The students both read to and wrote for younger children. The value of the interaction was immediately apparent. Protheroe's students learned first hand how to make stories and feel the pride of creation; and the little ones loved the attention of having stories written just for them.



Grade 13 students are adults for all intents and purposes. The children's literature unit reminded them about the importance of stories in their own lives. They also caught a glimpse of the role stories had to play for the upcoming generation of readers.


What comes through dramatically in all three articles is how stories transcend age, ability, and culture. Stories are for everyone.



*Our Own Words and the Words Of Others*

*Part 1*





## *Our Own Words and the Words Of Others, Part 1*

*David Booth and Jo Phenix*

Working to expand children's lives through literature is a delicate task. The teacher must recognize the current needs and interests of the young people and at the same time encourage and persuade them to read and listen to selections that may lead them to new and significant understandings. Some of this material may at first appear remote or even alien to the students' lives. The children must constantly go back and forth between the story and their own responses, attempting to understand the experiences in the narrative in terms of their own lives. This "negotiation" of meaning between the world of the child and the world of the book forms the basis of reading. The potential power of children's literature to alter perceptions, widen horizons, challenge biases, and develop sensitive and compassionate individuals is very exciting to us, as teachers.

Helping children to see beyond themselves in order to achieve a better understanding of their own lives means setting up situations where their own words and ideas have worth, so that they have the security and the competence to explore new literary territory, to express their thoughts and feelings about their discoveries, and, if we are lucky, to adapt, absorb, and reflect upon the new learning.

The children must make the poems, the stories, the articles, and the pictures their own by responding to the content of the selection from their own experience, by using the underlying linguistic pattern as a beginning point for their own writing and by adopting special words for their own use. They will grow to appreciate literature and language as they develop an aesthetic awareness from using every aspect of the story or the poem in their own lives. This feeling of ownership towards literature is the key to building truly literate people. As the children blend the authors' ideas, words, and patterns with their own thoughts and language, they take possession of the material and can use it to explore and communicate their new personal meanings.

Ontario Grade 1 teacher Jo Phenix has experimented creatively with the use of children's literature in the daily programs of children in

school. In the following interview she talks about some of the techniques she used to help children become a part of what they read, hear, and view, and offers several fine strategies for incorporating literature into the curriculum.

## **Our Own Words**

*David Booth:* Literature in the Primary Division. How do you have the children begin creating their own literature?

*Jo Phenix:* Right at the beginning it's just a one-word label, and then a sentence on each page. For example, in Colleen's book on Hallowe'en, each page has a single picture: "pumpkin", "ghost", "bat", "witch".

Janet uses the same kind of repeated pattern:

I like hearts on all kinds of things. I like hearts on swing sets. I like them on cars. I like hearts on pictures. I like hearts on clowns. I like hearts on games.

This one is a bit more complex – Angie's "I Was Walking at the Forest".

I was walking at the forest, I saw the sun. He said hello, and my friend said, "Hello, Mr. Sun," and the sun said hello back to us. I was walking at the forest. I saw trees. They said hello to me. I was happy. I said, "Did you say something?" They said, "Yes." Then I woke up with my sister. We went to the forest, I saw flowers. The flowers said hello to me, I said hello back to them. One day I woke up. I went to the forest. I went by myself. Then my friend came. I went to the forest. The sky said hello to me. I said hello back to him!

*David Booth:* I hear in the writing of the children all kinds of literary and linguistic structures that have come from the literature they have read and heard. Is reading a big part of your classroom?

*Jo Phenix:* It is. Quite a lot of the group writing that's done is part of the literature. The children read and internalize the pattern and then use the pattern in their own writing.

*David Booth:* How do you stop this from being simply restructuring at a simple level?

*Jo Phenix:* By doing brainstorming about different ideas, different settings, different concepts for the pattern, by collecting words and ideas, and then by working as a group to develop new ideas around the same pattern.

*David Booth:* And how do these groups share their stories when they are completed?

*Jo Phenix:* They share them, first of all, by publishing them, working together as a group to organize the story and illustrate it and do the publishing, and then we have a story circle where the groups take turns to read aloud their stories.

This next one came from a poem called "Over There". This is part of the original:

Over the rice fields, over the kites, over the top of the northern  
lights. Over the ice fields, over the snow, right to the ends of the  
earth we'll go.<sup>1</sup>

With this one the children worked in small groups, so the pattern books were written by a group of four children working together, and they chose the bottom of the ocean:

Over the rocks, under the fish, beside a whale, through the sea-  
weeds, near the starfish, around an octopus, on top of the sand,  
across a submarine, past some shells, on top of the seal, beside  
an otter, at the end of a shark, right to the bottom of the ocean  
we'll go.

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1. Cynthia Mitchell, "Over There", in *Fly Away Home*, ed. Jack Booth (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1984), p. 77.



And the next group chose over the rainbow:

Under the sun, on top of a house, through the clouds, under the clouds, behind some, across the jet, over a fence, around the children, in the pond, on the driveway, past all the bright colours, near a pot of gold, right to the end of the rainbow we'll go.

*David Booth:* The sensory awareness in "Over the Rainbow" is lovely. I noticed, for example, that the phrase "in the pond" suggests the reflection of the rainbow in the water. The children also seem to have the underlying rhythmical structure in every line that they use on every page. So the pattern is the same but the concept is different.

*Jo Phenix:* Right.

*David Booth:* How important are the visuals the children have created?

*Jo Phenix:* It's important. It's interesting that when they do their individual stories, some of the children illustrate before they write, some of them illustrate after they write.

*David Booth:* And how about when a group plans?

*Jo Phenix:* Again, it works both ways. Sometimes the words come first, sometimes the pictures come first. If it's a pattern that they are using, usually the words come first. If it's an idea, very often the pictures will come first.

*David Booth:* How do you handle such things as the spelling?

*Jo Phenix:* The children use inventive spelling as they write, so they get their ideas down on paper. Most of the children right from the start put letters down on paper, and for the ones that couldn't write enough letters for the work to be readable, I would transcribe when they read the story to me.

*David Booth:* Is the writing in the group books your printing?

*Jo Phenix:* Sometimes it is, sometimes not. I try to have the finished product coming out as well as possible, so when the children can't do it, I do it for them.

*David Booth:* I notice that their word choice is definitely not single, monosyllabic "basal reader" style.

*Jo Phenix:* It isn't. It's their own language, or it's the language from the literature.

*David Booth:* Do you have an example of the beginning stages where their "child talk" narrative is simply encoded and written down?

*Jo Phenix:* This one, "I Was Playing", by Angie:

I was playing outside in the snow with my brother. I went outside to play with my brother, then we went back inside and it was still snowing. Then we put back our snowpants and we got down in the snow and we made a snowman. I did it with my brother.

*David Booth:* But even that has a definite beginning, middle, and end, doesn't it? She has a sense of narrative.

*Jo Phenix:* Yes. I have one here by Shannon, the champion of the longest story. She even called it "The Story That Never Ends", because in conferences we talked about this structure.

One day I was reading a book and it was nearly supper time. My mom called me for supper. After my supper my mom said, "Go and get into your PJs and then come downstairs and read your book and then go to bed." I picked flowers while my mom was getting the breakfast for my dad and my brother, and my mom and I picked the flowers for Ryan and my dad and mom. And then I gave the flowers to them. They were my brother and my dad and my mom. And then my brother and me and my dad watched TV and my mom was getting the lunch ready. Then my mom called us for lunch and then we went shopping and then we came back and then my dad and me and my brother and my mom was getting supper ready and she called us for supper and she told us to get our PJs on and go to bed.

And it goes on for several more days like that.

*David Booth:* When they are reading aloud their own stories and their group stories, do they read with meaning and read by chunking the words into groups?

*Jo Phenix:* They do. When they read their own stories, that's the only way they can read. They read them back the way they wrote them.

*David Booth:* What connection do you see from reading their own stories to reading stories written by authors?

*Jo Phenix:* I think they learn to read for meaning by reading their own stories, because they are used to putting meaning in these stories. They expect to find meaning in a story; they expect it to make sense.

*David Booth:* When do you see the transition happening from reading our own writing to reading the words of others?

*Jo Phenix:* I think they go side by side. I don't know whether there'd be a stage of moving from one to the other. The two seem to grow together constantly.

*David Booth:* Then all the time you are reading aloud and helping them build up that deposit of literary and linguistic structures?

*Jo Phenix:* Right. From stories that they hear, you then hear the patterns and the ideas used in their writing.

*David Booth:* Let's take a look at some of the patterns that emerge in their writing. Do you have a counting book?

*Jo Phenix:* This is a counting one, a pattern from one that the children heard, "Cinnamon Bun".<sup>2</sup> Their own ideas for the counting rhyme were put down on chart paper and they used this as reading material for their chanting.

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2. "One, One, Cinnamon Bun", in C. Watson, *Catch Me, Kiss Me, Say It Again* (New York: Philomel, 1978).

*David Booth:* The oral came before the writing then?

*Jo Phenix:* Right. And then the children did the illustrations for the story and it was published in a book, "One, One, Elephants Come".

One, one, elephants come, two, two, kangaroo, three, three, honeybee, four, four, lions roar, five, five, sea lions dive, six, six, baby chicks, seven, seven, a bear called Kevin, eight, eight, monkeys wait, nine, nine, porcupine, ten, ten, start again.

*David Booth:* Where do they get those wonderful rhyming words?

*Jo Phenix:* It was brainstorming: "Just what can we find that rhymes with each word?"

*David Booth:* On the theme of animals?

*Jo Phenix:* There was a lot of discussion on themes, several themes were tried, but some things didn't work because they just couldn't find the right words.

*David Booth:* How much of the children is in the layout of the lines, for example, the numbers in black, and the rhyming words in red?

*Jo Phenix:* That's my idea to make it easy for them to read. When I did the original chart I did it this way, because with chart paper it's easier to read if alternate lines are different colours. Also it's easy to do a choral response that way because you can take either the red ones or the black ones.

*David Booth:* So the graphic input that you have in all of your books is equally important in the reading aspect as well?

*Jo Phenix:* Yes, it is. For example, how much goes on a page and the size of the print.



*David Booth:* That's the care artists take in putting out children's books and why it's equally important, when children write their own work, that they be able to read it easily.

*Jo Phenix:* This is a pattern from "A as in Apple Pie".<sup>3</sup> And this again was done by a group of children. The original brainstorming was done as a group and the children then chose pages to illustrate.

A as in airplane, B built it, C cleaned it, D dusted it, E entered it, F flew it, G gassed it up, H heard it take off, I iced up the wings, J just landed it, K kept the key, L looped the loop, M made the engine, N named it, O opened the door, P piloted it, Q quit the job, R rode in it, S stopped it, T towed it, U unfastened the seat-belt, V vacuumed it, W watched the movie, X exited, Y yawned on it, Z zoomed into the air.

*David Booth:* It reinforces the fact that the language they are using is quality language, not made-up language simply used for learning to read and write. When we read to children we want to read only the finest and the best, whether it's the word or the pattern.

*Jo Phenix:* An interesting thing about the alphabet book is that the children look at a lot of their ABC books as they are doing this, and they find out that a lot of the patterns are in the letters. For example, they don't know many words with "q", so it was interesting to make a list of those words and then decide which ones they could use in the story, and they started looking in other ABC books to find out the words they used for X and which letters were more difficult.

This one is a pattern from "Q is for Duck". It didn't take the children long to catch on to the pattern of that one.

A is for trampoline. Why? Because the trampoline has acrobats.

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3. "A Was Once an Apple Pie", in B. Ireson, *The Faber Book of Nursery Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958).

*David Booth:* The answers are written upside down.

*Jo Phenix:* It's interesting to see, too, which children bother to turn the page and which ones just go ahead and read it upside down.

B is for house.	Why? Because a house is built.
C is for baby.	Why? Because the baby cries.
D is for fire.	Why? Because a dragon breathes fire.
E is for volcano.	Why? Because a volcano erupts.

*David Booth:* They are putting much more symbolic thought in this one, aren't they? They are really fooling with the language, working with the concept, and building a whole new pattern.

*Jo Phenix:* In this one, the children made a list first of all the things they do in the snow and then did the illustrations for them. Then, working as a group, the illustrations were sequenced and the story was dictated, then cut and pasted together. It starts in the morning.

One day I woke up, I looked out of the window. It was snowing. I put my clothes on, I put my shirt and my sweater and my leg warmers and my pants on.

This particular one is illustrated with cut-and-paste collage as a model of the Ezra Jack Keats book, *A Snowy Day*.

I put on my snowpants, my boots, my mittens, my coat, my hat, my earmuffs, and my scarf. I was ready to go. Then I picked up my friend. She came outdoors. We rolled a big snowball.<sup>4</sup>

(That's a direct copy from the John Burningham story.<sup>5</sup> They liked that idea.)

We made a snowman with buttons out of raisins, a carrot nose and a licorice mouth. We dressed him in a scarf, mitts, and a hat. We fed the birds some bread, crackers, popcorn, and bird seed. We made some angels in the snow. And dug and dug and dug and made tunnels in the snow. We went in to see what it felt like. It felt freezing and wet. We made an igloo. We made a

4. E. J. Keats, *A Snowy Day* (New York: Viking, 1962).

5. J. Burningham, *The Snow* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974).

big pile of snow and dug out the insides and crowded inside and played. We saw bird tracks, dog tracks, stick tracks. We made sculptures. The snow has to be hard. We took a sharp stick and carved it. We skated on the pond and I fell down. It felt cold and I bumped my head. My friend and I fell down together. I went down the hill with the sled with my friend, I held on to my friend. When we came home we saw the Christmas lights on the house. They shone on my face. I felt bright and happy as if it was almost Christmas. I took off my winter clothes. We had hot chocolate; it was hot and sweet and it smelled chocolatey. I liked the marshmallows, it made me feel happy. We warmed our hands in front of the flaming fire. We sang carols and watched Christmas specials. It was night. It was still snowing. My friend went home. I went to bed. I felt tired. I would dream about everything I did today. I hope it snows tomorrow.

They ended the story the same way John Burningham did.

*David Booth:* You have there a compendium of two styles rather than two syntactic patterns, don't you? They are beginning to apply the style of authorship to their own work. Sometimes they use the syntactic pattern to build their own work on.

*Jo Phenix:* This one is a direct pattern. It's from "The Ants Go Marching", by Bernie.

The ants go marching, one by one, up and out of the earth, zigging and zagging in a long line. Where are they marching, one by one? Do they know? Do they know?

Michelle took this pattern and decided to write a story about bears. She writes:

The bears go thumping one by one, up a log, through the grass, up and up in a long line. Where are they thumping, one by one? Do they know? Do they know?

Two by two the bears go thumping, up a tree, down again, over a stone, under a ladder, through the flowers. Almost last comes Baby Bear. Where are they thumping, two by two? Do they know? Do they know? Three by three the bears go thumping, Baby Bear stops beside a rock. Up he climbs, down again. A caterpillar crawls away. Where are they thumping, three by three? Do they know? Do they know?

And a counting story:

One rainy Tuesday morning, while on my way to school, I saw two shivering geese flying away, one wet puddle freezing, near the little path through the woods. One windy Wednesday morning, while on my way to school, I saw three shivering geese flying away, two wet puddles freezing, one yellow leaf falling, near the little path through the woods. One thundering Thursday morning, while on my way to school, I saw four shivering geese flying away, three wet puddles freezing, two yellow leaves falling, one cold squirrel gathering nuts near the little path through the woods. One foggy Friday morning, while on my way to school, I saw five shivering geese flying away, four wet puddles freezing, three yellow leaves falling, two cold squirrels gathering nuts, one chilly child wearing a warm coat near the little path through the woods. One snowy Saturday morning, while on my way to the synagogue, I saw six shivering geese flying away, five wet puddles freezing, four yellow leaves falling, three cold squirrels gathering nuts, two chilly children wearing warm coats, one soft snowflake swirling, near the little path through the woods. One freezing Sunday morning, while on my way to the church, I saw seven shivering geese flying away, six wet puddles freezing, five yellow leaves falling, four cold squirrels gathering nuts, three chilly children wearing warm coats, two soft snowflakes swirling, one cheerful snowman grinning near the little path through the woods. One cloudy Monday morning, while on my way to school, I saw geese flying, puddles freezing, leaves falling, squirrels gathering, children wearing coats, snowflakes swirling, snowmen grinning. Why? It's winter.

*David Booth:* There is a climax there as well. They have also used cultural patterns: days of the week and counting backwards.

*Jo Phenix:* A lot of interesting things went on during the writing of this one, too, because at first it was just a bare list of geese and puddles and leaves and squirrels, and the children, on a second draft, went back, and added some of the other words to that. It happened by chance that one of the children noticed the alliteration there, "chilly children", and then they went back and started to change some of the other words to make that happen in other parts of the story, too.



*David Booth:* Their word awareness came after the ideas, and they wanted to refine and edit their own ideas that way. And the sounds help, don't they?

*Jo Phoenix:* Everything that is listed on the page is shown in the illustrations, so if it says "six shivering geese" there *are* six shivering geese in the picture. So it really forced them to put the detail into the illustrations too.

*David Booth:* Sometimes telling is a basic way for the child to start, isn't it?

*Jo Phoenix:* It is, yes. The children like to hear the same stories over and over, and they memorize the story patterns. This is Andrea's story, "The Beanstalk".

Once upon a time in a faraway land, there lived a princess and all around they were poor. One day there was a storm and the palace's window opened and the princess was gone. Then one day Mickey saw the cow between the beans. Mickey ran home. "I got one bean." "Beans, beans?" said Donald. "They're not ordinary beans," said Mickey. Donald threw the beans out the window. That night the beans started to grow and grow and grow. The next morning Mickey woke up with a surprise. He called to Donald and Goofy. They climbed and climbed and climbed until they came to the top. And then they saw a big castle . . .

*David Booth:* So in this story we have a Disney character appearing and she has the foundations of fairy tale, the qualities of fairy tale, the story grammar embedded in the writing.

*Jo Phoenix:* She does. She really likes things like "to grow and grow and grow, and they climbed and climbed and climbed . . ." She uses that a lot in her writing.

*David Booth:* How does it end?

*Jo Phenix:*

Then they found the princess. "How did you get there?" "A giant captured me," she said. "A giant," said Mickey. "Yes," she said. They all heard her. Then the giant made her sing a song and he fell asleep. They quietly took her. Then they were at the bottom. Mickey hurried, and the giant was dead, and they put the princess back in the castle and they lived happy ever after.

Julie's story "Cinderella Monkey" came as a result of a movie called *Cinderella Penguin*, a retelling of the Cinderella story.

Once upon a time there lived a monkey named Ella. She was very pretty. She had two stepsisters who were vain and ugly and mean, and a very, very mean stepmother. Ella lays the ashes, so they called her Cinderella. Every day they stuck a bucket of water and a mop in her hand. One day the doorbell rang and Cinderella said, "I'll get it." "A message!" "Let me see," cried the two stepsisters. And then Cinderella said, "Can I see?" "Sure, but you can't go. Only if you finish all your chores." "So what if I do finish all my chores today?" "We'll see about that. But before you do all your chores, you have to tell Mom and fix my clothes." "Mine too."

*David Booth:* How do you think they acquire this understanding of how a story functions?

*Jo Phenix:* By hearing a lot of stories and by reading a lot of stories, by reading stories many, many times, by taking part right in the story and joining in, chanting along with the story.

*David Booth:* This one has moved to a literary form immediately.

*Jo Phenix:* Paris comes from a Greek family and his mother tells him the Greek stories, over and over again, and when Paris came to school, he knew them well. Paris will go for quite a long time without writing very

much at all, or anything of much value. Then, when he is ready, he starts to write one of his stories, such as "Hercules".

Once upon a time there was a boy called Hercules. One day Hercules was in his crib. Two poisonous snakes went there. Hercules strangled them with his hand. From that day Hercules was a hero of all making. Hercules grew up and went to school and learned many things. Most of all Hercules liked to help people. The people believed Hercules was a son of God, or God, because he was so strong. Goddess Hera was very jealous and made Hercules do something bad. When Hercules realized what he did, he prayed to God Apollo what he could do to purify himself. Hercules was commanded to do the twelve labours that were impossible for any other ordinary man.

*David Booth:* And how old was Paris?

*Jo Phenix:* Paris was just seven.

*David Booth:* Read us another one he's written.

*Jo Phenix:* This one is "Prince of Troy". It took him a long time to write this one because he was a little embarrassed about his name.

*David Booth:* Because his own name is in it?

*Jo Phenix:* Yes.

Once upon a time there was a queen and a king, and they had a baby called Paris. One day the queen had a bad dream. She dreamed that the city of Troy was going to be burned. They asked when it was going to be. The answer was that one day Prince Paris was going to burn the city of Troy. The king was very worried. He decided to send Paris away. A shepherd took Paris to his cottage. Slowly Paris grew up and helped the shepherd. One day at the Olympus there was a celebration.

All the gods and goddesses; they forgot to invite goddess Aris. She was very upset of that. She decided to spoil the party. Goddess Aris threw a golden apple into the celebration, it was marked for the fairest. All the goddesses wanted the apple. God Zeus decided that judgement should be by Paris, the shepherd's son, who was really prince of Troy. All the goddesses promised him power, but goddess Aphrodite offered him the fairest woman. Paris gave the apple to goddess Aphrodite.

*David Booth:* Where do you think the child gets these amazing structures and vocabulary and formality of language?

*Jo Phenix:* Paris is an avid reader. He is a boy who likes to be by himself and any spare moment that he's got he goes out by himself and he reads. He reads constantly. So it's partly the old tradition in his family, a lot of storytelling in the family, and . . .

*David Booth:* This may be the best example of how our own words and the words of others combine in our own literary structures, in our own literary patterns.

*Jo Phenix:* It's interesting that the other children recognize this quality in Paris's writing too. Paris has a lot of respect in the class as a writer. I'd like to read the end of this story. The story structure in here, the detail, and the sequence in the story are just phenomenal. He doesn't miss any parts of it. And he talks about Menelaus and the Trojan war and the wooden horse, and the story of Achilles. It's all in here, and he ends his story saying:

Prince Paris fought until death for his country and his love.  
Its army won the war by the clever scheme of the wooden  
horse. This is the end of the Trojan war and the most beautiful  
love of Paris and Helen.

*David Booth:* This brings up another point that if they write about what they feel is important and use the structure that touches them, then their writing will be more powerful than if I inflict one pattern or style on them.

*Jo Phenix:* No other children in the class could write this way, and it's interesting that in between these stories that Paris writes he'll spend maybe two or three weeks writing things of very little quality. This is something that's important to him, it matters, and he seems to put all his writing energy into this.



*David Booth:* If the children are inundated with a format or genre so that they have a hundred folk tales, the story grammar becomes embedded right in their psyche. They have no difficulty using it.

What format do you have to help the children express their own intuitive emotional feelings and ideas and concerns?

*Jo Phenix:* I think the children do this best when it's something that does really concern them, and that's something that you can't plan for. When they are ready to write something personal, they do.

*David Booth:* But do you ever notice that what you've read triggers in the child his own emotional response?

*Jo Phenix:* It often does because the children often read stories together, in which case they'll talk to each other about the story, and if a story has been read in class, either read aloud by me or one of the other children, or read as a group, then they will talk about the story and apply it to their own experience.

This is "When I Was Sick", by Anita.

One day I was sick. My friend came over. She brought me some flowers to make me feel better. I said, "Thank you." She said, "You're welcome." Then my other friend came over too, and she gave me flowers. And I said, "Thank you," and I felt better from the flowers my friends brought. They knew that I would feel better. I was happy. I felt better and I was very surprised. When one of my friends just went home, my other friend was surprised too. My friend said, "Maybe it's because she catches your germ, because she catches all of her friends' germs. So I guess she doesn't want to get a cold." And she said, "I think I should go home too so I don't catch your cold." "But then who will play with me?" "Play with someone else that's sick too." Then my mom gave me some hot chocolate and I felt better. But I had very much fun at home. I even had lunch in bed. I never knew that when you're sick it's still good fun.

*David Booth:* She's taking her own experience and giving it a literary format.

*Jo Phenix:* And she's putting some humour in there too.

*David Booth:* Their use of dialogue, when do you notice that happening?

*Jo Phenix:* That often happens right from the start too. Sometimes they're not aware of it as dialogue, and it's just a thought stream.

*David Booth:* And do you give them quotation marks?

*Jo Phenix:* That's something that they seem to learn very quickly, that when you talk about somebody talking on their page, they can recognize it, and I found they learn quotation marks very easily, and they like to use them. It's the first punctuation they usually learn. Once they've used it they use it forever afterwards. They never forget it.

*David Booth:* What if a group has an experience they want to write down?

*Jo Phenix:* This particular one came as a result of the book "Some Day" by Charles, and the children had quite a long discussion about the things that they would really like some day. So this book is a collection of their ideas.

Some day I will go to my house and Edna will say, "Three cheers for Kim, the good, good girl." Some day my mother and father are going to say, "You can have your own treehouse." Some day I will go to my bedroom and see my brother clean my room. Some day I will see Michael Jackson in person. Some day I will go to the park and will say, "Want to be friends? We want to be your friends." Some day I will learn to swim. Some day I will come home and my brother will give me a present. Some day my mother and father are going to say, "Eat all the strawberries, won't you?" Some day I will go to school and Miss Phenix will say, "Don't do your jobs, Jason." Some day I will go to school and someone will say, "You're the best guy in school."

*David Booth:* Those are full of emotional content, aren't they? Each one of those.

*Jo Phenix:* Yes, because the children had to be selective. They only had one idea to write.

*David Booth:* That group thing forces them also to be careful and considerate of what they use. What kind of aesthetic growth do you think they have after this kind of reading and writing combination? Are they better at choosing books, do they like books, are books part of their lives?

*Jo Phenix:* There comes a point where you see them choosing books because of the content. Right at the beginning they've had to choose books that either have good pictures or the ones they think are easy to read. But suddenly they choose books because they are interested in the content, in what's in the book. And I think that's the breakthrough for them in reading.

*David Booth:* Do they ever go after particular authors?

*Jo Phenix:* Yes, they do. In fact, we used to have an author of the week, and we have author collections. Arnold Lobel was a favourite, A. A. Milne for a while, John Burningham at present. You find the style of the author coming through in their writing, too.

*David Booth:* Do you think that this kind of literature approach has any effect on their development as humans? Do they become better people?

*Jo Phenix:* I think they do, because with the reading and their writing and the sharing of their own writing they become aware of audience, they become aware of what other people are thinking about things, and aware of different points of view. They sometimes start off being very critical of each other and they become sensitive to the kind of things you say to somebody about writing, and about their idea. It's hard for little children to accept other people's ideas and to listen when other people talk, and I think this kind of experience in sharing helps them.

*David Booth:* Would you say this kind of embedded language play and usage remain with them at the school?

*Jo Phenix:* I think it does, yes. I think it does because you see it in their writing, you see it in the games they play, you see the patterns going out on the playground and the patterns from their games coming back into the classroom.

The imaginative writing produced by the children in Jo Phenix's class testifies to her skill as a teacher. She takes them beyond straight word recognition. Texts have meaning. She encourages the children to imagine, to picture what the words say, and to seek and play with the patterns inherent in the language. The children in Jo Phenix's class are lucky. They are actively engaged in the stories they read and in the ones they write – engaged in their “own words” and in the “words of others”.

*Cross-Age Tutoring in Writing*





# *Cross-Age Tutoring in Writing*

*Beverley Allinson*

## **Introduction**

The course described here was developed over a three-year period, largely in inner-city schools. It is designed to increase the communication skills of adolescents by partnering them with Kindergarten/Grade 1 children in co-operative activities related to storytelling.

In one school, six Grade 7 students volunteered to “work with small children and make up stories”. In another, homeroom teachers chose twelve Grade 7/8 students from two classes to work on the project. Three Kindergarten-Grade 1 teachers and their students participated.

The resulting groups represented children with a wide range of ability and language competence, and with a variety of ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds.

In both schools, a particular room became the workshop space; an open-area resource centre in one instance, a conventional classroom in the other. The older students were encouraged to choose a private space for their writing, and this soon became the accepted practice. They would regroup in the central area when they were done, to share their writing if they chose to. When the Primary children came to the workshops this pattern of movement in and out of the larger group easily included them. By that time the older students modelled confidently and purposefully.

## **The Course**

Two simultaneous workshops took place during January and February 1983. The course consisted of ten consecutive half-day sessions and developed as follows:

### **Phase 1: Themes and responses**

Intensive storybook reading. Writing in response to emerging themes.

### **Phase 2: Cross-age tutoring**

Visits to Primary classrooms. Observation. Interaction.

Primary children attend workshops. Partnering.

### **Phase 3: Story writing**

The older students plan and draft stories for the Primary children.

## **Themes and Responses**

Central to the program is a collection of storybooks that young children enjoy. It includes some titles that have been favoured by generations of readers, though most are contemporary. The selection includes resourceful female characters and male characters who express their feelings, and is as representative of the ethnic makeup of Metro schools as present publications allow. A large percentage of the stories have Canadian authors.

Each title, directly or obliquely, relates to the young reader's interest, concerns, and experience. The stories are about growing up, about family life, about friendship and conflict, fear and achievement. They feature characters who celebrate triumphs, or who overcome feelings of anger or jealousy or frustration with adults who don't understand. Many of the stories make the children laugh, sometimes in response to the humour in an event or situation, more often in delighted recognition of a childhood truth.

The older students experienced these stories in a number of ways. They were read to, they sampled for themselves, they read to one another, and they read aloud to the group. Listening to stories was favoured. Like their younger counterparts, the older students were often spellbound by a well-told story. The occasional appearance of one they loved to hear when young prompted excited recollections. Those who had forgotten, or for whom the theme had not then resonated, and those

who heard the story for the first time, were soon involved in the spirited discussion that followed such a reading.

Each student was given a particular title to peruse and asked to consider the factors that made the story a popular one. They then chose either to read the story to the group or to present a report. The ensuing discussion gradually led to a shared understanding of the authors' intentions and methods. Students were encouraged to respond to the aptness and truth of the emotional content, to consider what the writer knew to be true of young children.

Particularities of style, structure, rhyme, rhythm, and repetition were noted as the sample grew and stories could be compared and contrasted. In time, students discovered that certain themes reappeared and that writers explored them in a variety of ways. Later, when they had the opportunity to experiment with different forms and styles in their own story writing, the collection invariably influenced their writing. Throughout this process, the collection grew steadily until there were forty or so titles in circulation. Eventually, the students selected titles they would share with a young partner, and wrote about their choice. (Publication information on these and other titles appears in the bibliography at the end of this essay.)

### **Noisy Nora**

I think children would like this book because it is about a girl who wanted attention from her parents and she tried to get it by being noisy. Most children make a lot of noise so they would like this story. They would also like the pictures. She's a mouse. It's told in rhyme.

*Gordon (age 11)*

### **Jim Meets the Thing**

When Jim met the thing on television. I couldn't imagine how scary the thing was until I saw the thing in Jim's dream. I thought it resembled a dragon-like creature. I myself sometimes is scared by creatures on television. I think the moral of the story is "we're all scared of something, but we shouldn't be ashamed of it" but I'm not sure.

*Matthew (age 12)*

## Swimmy

Swimmy is the book I chose to share with the small kids. Why I pick *Swimmy* is because many kids always feel they are alone, or they are different from the others. That is what Swimmy felt when all his companies were gone. When Swimmy was travelling alone in the big ocean he saw many interesting creatures and he learnt that the world is beautiful.

*Sze Wa (age 13)*

The storybook themes quickly established a rich reference bank and provided a feelings-focused content for the course. Reading about characters like themselves encouraged both age groups to write with increasing confidence about their keenest interests and their deepest concerns.

The older students needed little encouragement to write about incidents from their childhood. The writing that followed shared talk led to swift and sure narrations about being lost, having temper tantrums, and dealing with bullies, nightmares, and monsters in the dark.

Some titles are particularly effective in prompting such writing. For example, *Benjamin and Tulip* is a skilful and funny story about two racoons and a rough start to a friendship. Tulip bullies the meek Benjamin in a series of incidents that lead to a satisfying resolution and the end of hostilities. The story triggered the following response:

It happened when I first came to Park School. I was new and I only knew a few people. But there was one particular boy his name was Derek. I only knew him a little bit because he was my brother's friend's brother. I was very shy because when I go to new places I get very quiet. One day he seemed to be trying me out to see how I would react. So he called me a name.

I ignored him hoping he would stop. Every time he seen me he would hit me or call me a name. Sometimes I would try and hit him back but he seemed to keep doing it more. I decided if I tried hard enough I would be able to avoid seeing him. I used to go and come to school through the front door because everybody including Derek used to go through the school yard in the back. One day he must have noticed it because he was in the front when I was coming home from school. I tried to pretend that I didn't see him. He walked about four paces behind me and called me every name in the book but I wouldn't turn around. He thought of another process of getting my attention

by throwing rocks, but I still ignored him. Then he finally had the nerve to come up and hit me. I could not take it any more so I grabbed him tripped him onto the ground and kept hitting him. Naturally he hit me back. I gave him a punch. I never usually punch people but I was so mad I got the nerve to punch him. That must have made him realize I wasn't joking because he stopped bugging me from then on. To tell the truth we get along pretty good now. In this story I was like Benjamin.

*Sharon (age 12)*

A reluctant-to-write student produced the following:

There was one time in my life when I have been like Tulip. I had this friend named Cindy and she has a little brother named Robert we had to share a balcony and she used to sleep over a lot and we use leave her balcony door open because it led into her room and she had a lock on her door and the second door on the balcony was mine so we used to lock my bedroom door and walk from my room to hers then we went down stair of her apartment into her brothers room and poured sugar and toothpaste all over the bed his floor and him we then took some sewing string and wrapped it all around him then she took his slippers we went up to the kitchen and pour I think it was tomato juice in them took some of her fathers rum put it in a glass wiped some on his lips and put the glass on the floor ran up to her room closed her balcony door behind us ran into my room the next morning we got in trouble but it was fun.

*Sandy (age 12)*

Sandy later chose this as her most satisfying piece of writing and commented:

All kids love mischief but hate to get into trouble and what made it even better was because I was doing it with a friend and didn't get into as much trouble with my parents than if I was by myself.

Students enjoyed groping for memories. When asked to shape fragments into a short narrative piece they responded as follows:

A very long time ago, when I was just able to walk by myself, my father took a walk with me to a nearby pier somedays after dinner. Sometimes we went weekly, but sometimes we did not



go for once in a month. We could see the sunset, some fishermen cleaning their boat, some ferries were coming across the sea. My father's and my shadow shaded a part of the shiny beach. We walked along the beach until the moon took the sun's place.

*Sze Wa (age 13)*

I remember my old house and the kitchen counter. My mother always sat on it when she was on the phone. I would look up at her, trying to see her face. I would fall over from straining my neck backwards. Then I would cry and my mother would pick me up and put me on the counter. I could look over the entire kitchen. Boy, I wouldn't want to fall from up here! But then my mother would hang up the phone and put me down, telling me to run along to a friend's house or play with my brothers. The kitchen was no longer mine, but I was its. I was engulfed in the hugeness of everything. But it's no more, for I'm big now and can reach the counter from the floor.

*Derek (age 14)*

Several students chose their writing about a childhood memory as their favourite piece.

The most satisfying piece of writing was the one where we went back to the earliest age. I felt satisfied because it was amazing to see my childhood displayed on a piece of paper. The real joy was the innocence I possessed at such a young age and the amount of ignorance I also possessed.

*Lisa (age 12)*

## **Cross-Age Tutoring**

Concurrently with the intensive reading and writing in response to emerging themes, the older students began to become familiar with the younger children.

During the first three workshops, groups of from three to four older students visited the classrooms for brief periods. They were free to sit and observe, roam and converse, become involved in activities at the various centres, and eventually to engage with a particular child for an extended period.

Back in the workshop setting, their impressions, opinions, and questions were shared through talk and writing. Records of the classroom visits were made as journal entries. Friends read one another's accounts.

In preparation for their first one-to-one encounter with their partners, the older students selected a story to read aloud, considered what they might talk about, and organized their work space so that both students could share the story and work in comfort.

In response to the story and conversation, the Primary children made up stories. Mostly they wrote about themselves. Sometimes they retold the story they had heard, with themselves as the central character.

Hearing Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are* prompted the following:

One cold night I had a good dream. I dreamed I was on an island with friendly scary monsters with horns and big teeth. We had a party with lots of food. I got bored of it and woke up.

*Angela (age 6)*

Sometimes a theme triggered a personal anecdote. After hearing a story about sibling rivalry, one child wrote:

When I was smaller and wanted to go outside my sister said I couldn't so I got mad. I told my mother and she didn't do nothing. I threw my ball and hit my sister in the arm. She started yelling at me. She threw the ball at me but missed me. She started chasing me but she couldn't find me because I was hiding under the bed. I felt happy because she couldn't find me. Then I snuck up behind her and scared her. Then I didn't want to go outside so I watched TV.

*Michael (age 5)*

Often the young story-tellers introduced their own topic, writing about recent activities:

Yesterday I went to the K club to have some dinner. It was spaghetti but I missed the dinner. Because I had to go home to get the form to have dinner.

*Alison (age 7)*

Many of the Primary children were beginning readers. A few were beginning to write independently. With help, most could write captions to their drawings. Some used invented spelling, some used personal dictionaries and had their older partner print words in appropriate sections. Those who were not yet reading enjoyed hearing their stories read back to them and later to the group at large.

The older students discovered that their partners were eager to read and write. In the discussion that ended the first partnering session, they talked about the encounter and planned for their next meeting in their journals.

Two similar workshops followed. In general, the Primary children attended eagerly, interested in hearing more stories and talking with the older students. As the collaborations continued, the children increased in confidence as story-tellers. Most older students were genuinely interested in their young partners and enjoyed helping them. By trading experiences, admitting difficulties, and talking about frustrations and satisfactions, they developed techniques that helped them arouse and maintain their partners' interest and co-operation. They learned how to recapture a partner's wandering attention and how best to relate to a child who was shy or reluctant or obstreperous.

As receivers of the stories, the older students were encouraged to question and to extend the young child's writing by asking for detail to help shape the story's sequence:

When I give my fish some food he eats it so fast because he is hungry and when I shut the light the fish is scared and when I open the light he ain't scared. He is a boy. I could tell why he is a boy because he doesn't lay eggs. Sometimes the fish bowl is dirty. I put water in a bag. I wash the bowl and I take the rock out too. I carry the fish and I put it back in the bowl.

*Elaine (age 6)*

Above is what my partner Elaine dictated to me for the story she was writing. Today I feel is a nice day because before Elaine wouldn't hardly talk to me and now she isn't afraid any more. I think I got her out of her shell. Elaine is a very bright girl and

she seems to be very proud of what she done today. At first she wouldn't tell me a story so I asked her if she wanted to write it down herself. She said yes. Elaine kept on asking me how to spell words. I told her some letters but others I told her to sound out. After a while I took over the writing. We didn't get the pictures coloured in because we didn't have time so she told me that she would finish it at home. I feel that Elaine is eager to learn and I am eager to help her.

*Pauline (age 12)*

My mother bought a dog when I was six. I like pets a little. Sometimes I see a cat and I went out to give the cat some milk. I like the dog a little too. I like to keep the cat. Sometimes my dog chases the cat. One day the cat started to talk to me. "May I have some milk" the cat said. I gave him some milk. The dog chases the cat a lot. I said "stop" to the dog. The dog stop when I say stop.

*Thang (age 6)*

This was the story that my partner and I wrote. I think he wrote this story because I read a story to him that is like this. It was hard to get him to start because he kept saying I don't know, but I finally got him into it. He was interested in everything and especially what things are going to happen next. He asked me a lot of questions but I managed to answer every one of them before he went back to his classroom. I could see he was satisfied. I hope I could work with him again because I know that he would write a long story about What's Next!

*Vinh-Kien (age 12)*

A highly original story was written during the third collaboration with a partner skilled at questioning. The six-year-old in question was one of the most skilled and articulate. This was her first full-length imaginative story, begun at the workshop and finished at home.

Sammy wanted to be a giant because he was tired of being small. Sammy ate a magic peanut butter sandwich and turned into a giant. He was as tall as the CN Tower. His steps were as big as Dundas Public School. Now that Sammy was too big for his house, he decided to walk around Toronto to see if he could find a house big enough for him to live in. Now he was really tired and decided to go to sleep. When he woke up, he was

really hungry. Sammy ate ten pieces of bread and drank a whole jug of milk. It was a really hot day, so Sammy went to swim in Lake Ontario. Then he went to Niagara Falls to take a shower, because the fish got caught in his hair. Sammy wanted to turn back to his normal size. He made another peanut butter and jelly sandwich and he returned to a little boy. He then went outside to play soccer with his friends.

*Jennifer (age 6)*

## Story Writing

The older students began to outline stories as their work with a partner continued. Drawing on the bank of themes and story lines, they developed ideas they thought suitable for their audience. They chose real characters, created new ones, planned likely events, and experimented with different plot lines and resolutions. They learned to select and reject ideas. Some made mock-up booklets. This technique of devising words and illustrations in conjunction motivated students slow to start and helped keep long-winded writers simple and to the point.

Vinh-Kien's scrutiny of "pop-up" stories and his application of this style of story-telling curbed his tendency to include his every thought in a piece of writing. His heavy head cold inspired the following

### **Cold**

There was once a boy named Peter who hated to go to school.

He loved to go out to fly his kite in the park.  
He liked to play marbles, but he hated school.

One day he decided that if he had a cold, he wouldn't have to go to school.

So he started to look for one.  
He looked in the closet but there wasn't a cold.  
He looked in his pocket but there wasn't a cold.  
At last, he looked in his nose, and there was the cold.



Peter was very happy that he had the cold and he told his mother about it.

His mother made him drink medicine and stay in bed. He wasn't allowed to play marbles or fly his kite in the park.

Now Peter was miserable and he wanted to go to school.

Few students achieved this intelligent combination of humour and gentle moral. When writing to get a message across, they tended to be very heavy-handed indeed. A useful approach to discourage a hectoring tone emerged as the conversation turned to humour and the students shared examples from the storybook collection. Some were able to move beyond slapstick and insults as they discovered the effectiveness of whimsy, ludicrousness, and other more subtle forms that young children can appreciate. The work of Robert Munsch (*The Dark and Mud Puddle*) was particularly useful in this respect.

Many students wrote imaginary stories that featured their partner as the central character. After working for two sessions with Oy-Kengh, Matthew observed: "She was very shy at first and still is and I don't know how to make her feel more relaxed. She likes dolls a lot which is why I guess she made up her first story about one." Combining these insights, he began a story for her:

Up in her room, Oy-Kengh was playing with three little bears. The first bear was called Ben. The second bear was called Sue. The third bear was called Helen. Oy-Kengh loved the bears so much she wished they were real. In a sudden shot a falling star flew past her window. "A falling star," she thought, "I wish the bears were real," she said and closed her eyes and thought it over and over again. Then Ben yawned. Oy-Kengh didn't see because her eyes were still closed . . .

The Primary children were delighted to appear "in print", and some reciprocated by writing stories about their Senior partners. A lively exchange between partners occurred in one group when Cindy read Wagner's *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* to Jodi, who

promptly began a critical account of life with her new baby brother. By a happy coincidence, the storybook theme was the appropriate one to release Jodi's grievances. Cindy was sensitive to the feelings exposed and decided to write a fantasy in which Jodi wishes to be a baby again. She wrote this outline:

Jodi is lying in bed wishing she was her baby brother.

Next morning she wakes up and finds herself in a crib in a room full of toys and wallpaper with little teddy bears on it.

Her mother comes in and changes her diaper.

She gets fed in a high chair the way she wanted to be fed. Spills the milk and makes a lot of mess.

She doesn't have to go to school so she is very happy.

She wants to watch TV but her mother makes her take long naps.

She got so bored of taking long naps she wishes to be who she was again.

In the morning she is in her own room. She is sucking her thumb and had wet her bed.

Jodi is glad she is a big sister again.

In turn, Jodi wrote about Cindy as her baby-sitter. The story had a happy ending, but only after the baby-sitter had endured a series of Jodi-instigated pranks.

The students began many stories and completed some. In a few instances, second and third attempts were drafted. The writing in progress was shared through the various stages, and the students were encouraged to build on each other's ideas. During these workshops there was adequate time to confer with each writer so that favoured ideas for stories could be discussed and developed. The individual folders of writing were fat by now.

At the final workshop the stories were read to the Primary children. With the smaller group it was possible to arrange a reading marathon. The six older students read and reread to three and four children at a time so that all of the stories were heard by all concerned. The students in the larger group read their stories to their partner – and any interested other – in a loosely structured session.

At the end of the course, teachers' comments were invited. Generally, the Grade 7/8 teachers found that students had improved in attitude and in their practice of writing. Some weeks later, it was reported that three students had voluntarily visited the Primary rooms for further cross-age tutoring experiences.

Primary teachers attributed children's heightened interest in the written word to successful partnerships in the workshop context. Some children were writing independently for the first time; others were producing longer and more detailed stories.

Ultimately, the three separate phases of the course (intensive reading, cross-age tutoring, and story writing) coalesced into a powerful experience about the pleasures of reading and writing. On a human level, the children increased their sensitivity to literature and to each other. The older partners, particularly the ESL students, demonstrated a marked increase in confidence and language competence; withdrawn children learned to extend themselves; the impatient learned to practise tolerance; and poorly motivated children found a sense of focus in the partnership. On a technical level, all the children learned a great deal about the practical problems of making stories – about how to make sense out of words and put them in an intelligible order.

When children talk about something they really know, individual voices begin to emerge. Others listen and begin to write and act with increasing certainty. Elements in the program are surely conducive to the development of such behaviour. Though there are no formulas for success with every young person, many of the practices described in this report reach the majority most of the time.

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*Six Magic Words*



## Six Magic Words

Brenda Protheroe

The last Grade 13 class of the year at Vaughan Road Collegiate is marked by tears, embraces, and the frantic outpouring of friendship and nostalgia onto the pages of the yearbook. It is a rite of passage, an unspoken acknowledgement that one phase of life is past and a new one about to begin. Not wishing to interfere with the intensity of this ritual, I had decided not to finish our reading of Ted Hughes' *The Iron Man*,<sup>1</sup> which I had begun reading aloud, chapter by chapter, several weeks before. Most students agreed, with just a trace of regret, vowing to borrow or buy the book and finish it on their own. Two young men, however, insisted that they *had* to finish the book, that they could not go on with the rest of their lives until they found out what happened to the Iron Man and, having found refuge and relative quiet in a corner of the room, they spent the remainder of the period taking turns reading the book to each other. I was struck by two things: by the powerful hold of *The Iron Man* and by the fact that the finishing of this piece of literature became for those two young men a part of their rite of passage into adulthood.

We started the children's literature unit in April. By that time, the students had already heard, seen, and discussed many books (mostly picture books, including the two that provoked the most discussion, Russell Hoban's *The Dancing Tigers*<sup>2</sup> and Jenny Wagner's *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*<sup>3</sup>) as a result of a routine established at the beginning of the year of weekly fifteen- to twenty-minute readings. (For a fuller list of appropriate books, see the bibliography at the end of this essay.) I did most of the reading, but we also had several guest readers. The students reacted variously to my announcement that I was about to read a "children's book" to them – I detected looks and sounds ranging from disdain to curiosity to enthusiasm, none of which surprised me.

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1. T. Hughes, *The Iron Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).

2. R. Hoban, *The Dancing Tigers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979).

3. J. Wagner, *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* (Harmondsworth, Mx.: Penguin, 1977).

What did surprise me, however, was what happened in both classes once I began to read. The desks were in a large circle so that there was an open space in the middle of the room. Two sentences into the story a hand shot up with a request to be allowed to sit on the floor. Making the move a few at a time as the spirit caught them, all but four or five of the thirty hulking Grade 13 bodies in each class spent the first few of their weekly story sessions huddled together reliving, they said, treasured moments and feelings from the past.

The centrepiece of the unit itself was the production of student-written and -illustrated story books that would appeal to children and the "testing" of those books in our junior feeder schools. Much of the work was done on the students' own time, but several activities leading up to the creation of the books were completed in class time, often in small-group situations. These activities included storytelling "exercises", a group composition of a modernized fairy tale, the reading and discussion in small groups of selected books followed by a writing activity, and a "fantasy journey". The other component of the unit was a "research assignment", which is described below.

I chose two simple, widely used storytelling "warm-up exercises" to begin the unit. Students working in groups of four or five used such "starters" as, "There was an old woman who lived on a hill . . .", "Once, long ago, the Sun and the Moon fell in love . . .", and "The meanest person I ever knew . . .". One after another they added to the developing story and eventually brought it to a conclusion. Then, still in groups, they retold in the same fashion a fairy tale they remembered from childhood, embellishing it with as much detail as possible. They had great fun doing this, and it served to set the tone for the rest of the unit and to start the creative juices flowing. Some groups attempted to make their stories rhyme, others used irony or satire, and one group coined a series of new words to describe their "meanest person".

The modernized fairy tales were written during one period and shared with the class the next. The students rediscovered the difficulties and rewards of group composition and produced funny and clever results, often with overtones of political satire and social commentary. The most applauded was a rendition of "Cinderella" told from Cinderella's point of view in southern-California "Valley Girl" lingo, which was popular at the time.

The next step involved the collection in advance of a large number of children's picture books, one for each student in the class. Because of my interest in children's literature I had ten or fifteen in my own collection that I had not already read to them and was able to supplement these with a supply from the English co-ordinator's office. A children's literature unit for use in Grade 12 general-level English programs in the City of York had been prepared the summer before, and a box full of books purchased to accompany the unit, and I was lucky enough to have access to this resource. (It is also, of course, easy to gather books from local public and school libraries and from the students themselves. Several of my students brought in books they had loved as children, and most of them had stories about favourite books and folk tales and legends told by Italian, Greek, and West Indian parents and grandparents.)

I think it is important to make sure that the books used at this stage are of high quality. My preference was for well-illustrated books telling a well-developed story with imaginatively drawn characters and settings. Although several were brought in, I avoided the Walt Disney-type books featuring such well-known cartoon characters as Mickey Mouse and the Smurfs. The characters and plots tend to be predictable and of limited complexity and nuance.

The students were again divided into groups of four or five (several groups were sent off to the seminar rooms in the library to cut down on the din in the classroom, as roars of approval and explosions of laughter and delight greeted the reading of many of the books). Each student was



instructed to read his or her book aloud to the others and then to lead a discussion of as many of the following topics as possible: illustrations, appeal to child or adult, feelings, values, symbols, images, motifs, themes, and language patterns. I wanted to introduce an element of critical analysis to prepare them for what would be expected of them in their "research assignments". We then had a general, whole-class discussion of the books and the topics and they were assigned a piece of writing, the first draft of which was to be ready for the following class. Basing their writing on the book they had read, they were to: (a) write an account of a similar real-life experience they had had; (b) retell the story from a different point of view; (c) write and record two radio "sales pitches" for the book, one aimed at children and the other at parents; (d) write and record a radio drama script; or (e) write and record a radio commentary. The rough drafts were then revised, edited, and recorded (where appropriate). The "sales pitches" and radio scripts and commentaries were the most popular choices, and the "products" were delightful! The students displayed great awareness and mastery of the various techniques of soft-sell seduction, hard-sell hucksterism, humour, and parody. As someone who normally loathes (and will do anything to avoid) marking, I was shocked to find myself actually enjoying the evaluation of student work during this unit.

The "fantasy journey", followed by a written account of the journey, was the last in-class activity of the unit and required the teacher to provide stimuli for the students' imaginations. The students were most pleased by this activity and found that they were able to develop details of setting and character they later used in their books. I began by asking them to make themselves comfortable, to close their eyes, breathe deeply and quietly, concentrate on my words, and let their minds and imaginations see whatever they wished. Then, speaking softly and pausing frequently to allow them time to explore and embroider the images in their mind's eyes, I talked them out of their seats, through the opened ceiling (propelled and supported by a huge balloon), and through the sky

to a landscape in another time and another world inhabited by beings of their own creation. It is important, I think, to draw their attention to details of the landscape and beings, sounds, colours, textures, smells, etc. It is possible to incorporate into a story phrases like "something strange is happening", "notice how the beings are reacting", or "observe how the situation is resolved". The story line will be sketchy at best, but the students will be encouraged to think in terms of plot development. I was careful to bring the students back to the classroom from their fantasy world and to allow them a few seconds to review and reflect upon their journeys. I should have posted a notice on the door asking anyone who arrived late to wait for a signal to come in. One young man entered just as everyone had begun to relax and concentrate and was greeted with some hostility!

The students had been told at the beginning of the unit that they would be required to produce a book of their own, and during the time spent on the activities previously described they were also thinking, planning, writing, revising, illustrating or conscripting illustrators, editing, organizing, and book making. I had told them that it was not necessary for them to do their own illustrations but that they could arrange (by whatever means, including, I fear, coercion!) for a brother, sister, or fellow student to do the illustrations. Most did their own, but the artists of the school soon found themselves in great demand among the others. I was totally unprepared for – as well as surprised and delighted by – the excellence of the sixty books that they produced, and I cannot begin to describe the diversity of the results, the time, energy, and care that went into them, and the feelings of pleasure and pride they produced in the students. We spent a whole period reading them, marvelling at them, and enjoying them. They were truly "works of art".

One of the things that inspired the students, I believe, was their understanding that a real audience existed for their work and that they would personally present it to that audience. There was a fair amount of

nervousness surrounding the visits to the junior feeder schools. The students had secured a promise from me that they would not be exposed to anyone above Grade 3 ("The older ones are killers"! ) and that they could work in pairs. I in turn had made arrangements through the five extremely co-operative junior school principals or vice-principals for the students to spend time in at least one Primary classroom reading their books to the children with the teacher present. My students were eager to return to the schools from which they had graduated and that was arranged, where possible. The afternoon of the exodus arrived and off they went looking nervous. Some grumbled about not wanting to go, and some of the more macho young men worried about their images. One black-leather-jacketed individual arrived at the classroom to pick up his book (it was not "cool" to be seen carrying it around the school) and asked me if he *had* to go. I sent him on his way. When I saw him in the hall the next morning, the mournful expression of the day before had vanished. "I was a hero, miss! They thought I was Sylvester Stallone's brother!" Others had similar tales and were considerably buoyed up and excited by their receptions in the various classrooms they had visited. We spent a period exchanging stories, after which I asked them to write about their experiences. One young woman wrote the following account:

I can't believe it, I actually wrote a book! Not a short story or essay or poem, but a real book with illustrations. Once the book had been laminated and bound together and I held it in my hands, I felt a sudden surge of happiness and pride. Then, when I gazed upon the cover and saw the six magic words – written and illustrated by Yasna Medunic – I almost got up on my desk and screamed with ecstasy. Indeed, finishing my book was one of my finest moments. But then another challenge stood before me. I liked my book, my mother liked my book, but would the real critics, the children, like my book? That was the question. On May 11, 1983, I set off to J. R. Wilcox to find out.

I visited the Grade 2 class first. They were at their desks when I arrived. When I walked in they became very quiet as

they stared at me. I walked over to a chair and sat down. Their teacher told them I had come to read them a story. Their smiles widened and then they all rushed to sit at my feet. I told them my name and then we spent the next five minutes trying to guess where I was born. After a while I got to my story. As I read it I looked around at them. Their eyes were wide and their mouths were slightly opened. I continued, feeling a bit more confident. At the end they all clapped and then the questions started. When did I write the book? Why did I pick Sheldon as a name? Was I really eighteen years old? Did I have a boy-friend? Who drew the pictures? The questions were endless, but time was not. Soon I had to go, but not before they told me just how much they had liked my book. I don't think I've ever been praised quite so highly before. I left the class with my head in the clouds and my feet barely touching the ground.

The next class was a group of Grade 1 students. They were almost like the previous class except that they were much wilder; it took them about three minutes to get settled down. I thought I was in certain trouble. Would these kids sit quietly for five minutes and listen to me as I told them a tale about a short giraffe? For some reason I doubted it. I soon learned that there was a little boy in the class with the same name as my short giraffe. As I read everyone was quiet, some fidgeted at times, but they all listened. When I finished they clapped, but Sheldon, the little boy, a little louder than the rest. Unfortunately, only four children were allowed to ask questions and before I knew it, the teacher was thanking me for coming and expressing sympathy that I had to leave so soon. I waved to the children and left. As I skipped down the hallway I felt great. They had truly liked my book. Then and there I decided to go home and write something new for I had, for the first time, realized how it felt to have people really appreciate your work. I also realized that authors take pleasure in their work not just because they make money from book sales, but also because they enjoy it thoroughly. The smiles from the children made up for all the hours I had spent thinking up my tale, and all the nights I had sat up cutting out pictures. It was most certainly a worthwhile experience.

The "research assignment" was due three weeks after the books and was designed to introduce (in most cases) and reintroduce (in a few cases) the students to other genres, some of the "classics" of children's literature,

the work of certain authors, or selected fairy tales. The assignment required them to undertake a short (about three pages) exploration of the following topics:

- a) children's poetry;
- b) at least two books by C. S. Lewis, Kenneth Grahame, Arthur Ransome, Lewis Carroll, A. A. Milne, Russell Hoban (including *The Mouse and His Child*<sup>4</sup>), Susan Cooper, Rosemary Sutcliffe, or Lyn Cook;
- c) two different versions of *Hansel and Gretel* (Grimm), *Cinderella* (Perrault), or *Snow White* (Grimm) and the appropriate chapter of Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*.<sup>5</sup>

They were directed to discuss characters, settings, values, themes, feelings, and appeal, and to explain why they liked or disliked the story or collection of poetry. In the case of (c) they were asked to discuss the differences between the two versions of the fairy tale, to outline Bettelheim's interpretation, and to comment on it. This topic proved, as expected, to be quite a challenge to those who chose it, but they did a superb job. Although the assignment lacked the "glamour" of the making and presenting of the books, I think it played an important role in the unit.

I cannot think of anything in my teaching career that has given me or my students as much satisfaction and reward as this unit. It is not presented here as "state of the art" or as a model to be emulated for there are many such units in use in classrooms in the province that are as good or better. It is offered, rather, in a spirit of shared enthusiasm for and belief in the joy and benefits of introducing secondary school students to the enormously rich diversity of children's literature. Although the prime

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4. R. Hoban, *The Mouse and His Child* (New York: Avon Books, 1982).

5. B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Random House, 1977).

objective was to provide a literary experience for the Grade 13 students, there are also, I think, important implications for the literacy of the next generation. I may have oversold it a little but the class passwords became: "What are you going to do for your children?" "*Read* to them!"

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Yashima, T. *Umbrella*. New York: Viking Press, 1958.

*Epilogue:*

*Share, Listen, Mediate*



## Epilogue: Share, Listen, Mediate

Lissa Paul

"What are you going to do for your children?" Brenda Protheroe asks the students in her class. "Read to them!" comes back the answer in chorus. At the beginning of *Growing With Books*, "share", "listen", and "mediate" are named as key refrains that ring through the book. They resonate powerfully in this section. A genuine love of stories that crosses age and grade boundaries is palpable between teachers and students. The authors of the articles and the child authors they quote all delight in stories – the ones they read and the ones they write – and in the sound and the sense of words, the shape and pattern of stories, and the images that words make.

It is their "hands-on" approach to reading and writing that makes the articles so compelling. All the teachers are in the thick of things, mucking about with words. The children in Jo Phenix's class internalize the patterns of stories and make connections between words and meaning. That is because they consciously look at the patterns at work in the texts. They learn about alliteration. Struck by the sound of "chilly children", they look for opportunities to introduce words to their own stories that create the same pleasing sounds. The children discover that they have something to say – so the techniques they learn are focused on the best possible ways to say what they mean. They understand what they are reading (and the cadences of spoken language) because, as Phenix says, they expect stories to mean something. So their stories are verbally and visually rich and witty: as in "A is for trampoline. Why? Because the trampoline has acrobats"; and in the imagist description of a rainbow's reflection in a pond as, simply, "a rainbow in a pond".

The value of sharing stories dominates the articles by Allinson and Protheroe. The children in Bev Allinson's class shared experiences, admitted difficulties, and developed techniques to arouse interest and co-operation. They learned to think about words and pictures together and shared writing in progress. Brenda Protheroe's group experienced

first hand the relationship between literature and life – the power of stories to bring people together. The older students listened to the little ones and were tickled to find themselves objects of adoration and admiration. Protheroe's account ends with a lovely affirmation of the value of her experience as something presented "in a spirit of shared enthusiasm for and belief in the joy and benefits of introducing secondary school students to the enormously rich diversity of children's literature".

Reading and writing work in tandem; try to connect the stories you read in class with the kinds of stories the children write. With a class of beginning readers, you might listen to the kinds of things they talk about, both with you and with their peers. Eavesdrop discreetly. Once you have a sense of the hot gossip in the playground, you might use it as the basis for a story, to be composed collectively, individually, or in groups. Try to link what is being written with what is being read. For example, if Jenny (an imaginary student in your class) finds five dollars on her way to school today, you might read *Lost and Found* by Jill Paton Walsh,<sup>1</sup> or the Andersen tale "The Tinderbox",<sup>2</sup> or the Grimm tale about the genie in the bottle,<sup>3</sup> or *Do Not Open*.<sup>4</sup> (Check with other teachers or the school librarian about other appropriate stories.) Then ask if anyone has a lost-and-found story he or she might like to tell. If the whole thing falls flat, try a different approach.

You might also talk about how writers think about composition. Read what Maurice Sendak or C. S. Lewis or E. B. White (or one of the class's current favourite authors) has to say about composition. Then consider how to apply what professional writers say about writing. If at all possible, have a writer come into your classroom to share stories

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1. Jill Paton Walsh, *Lost and Found* (London: André Deutsch, 1984).

2. Hans Christian Andersen, "The Tinderbox", in *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. Erik Christian Haugaard (New York: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 1-7.

3. J. Grimm and W. Grimm, "The Spirit in the Bottle", in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 458-462.

4. Brinton Turkle, *Do Not Open* (New York: Dutton, 1985).

about writing with your students. Your teacher-librarian, board of education, or the Canadian Children's Book Centre, for example, may be able to supply information on how to get a writer into your class.



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### Books for Children

The authors in this section have provided a wealth of material for linking reading and writing. To isolate a few stories here would impoverish their accounts. So if you are looking for stories to trigger a writing session, look back to their articles and bibliographies.

## Other Resources

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The following organizations may help you contact authors you wish to invite to talk to your class:

Canadian Society of Children's Authors,  
Illustrators, and Performers (CANSCAIP)

P.O. Box 280, Station L  
Toronto, Ontario  
M6E 4Z2

Children's Book Centre  
229 College Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5T 1R4

The League of Canadian Poets  
24 Ryerson Avenue  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5T 2P3

The Writers' Union of Canada  
24 Ryerson Avenue  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5T 2P3





